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ART AND THE UNCONSCIOUS.

IT has been said that "Art as the formulation of a unique and distinct psychological attitude is unquestionably one." I am in profound agreement with this, provided no implication be made that the merely psychological unity is all that we have to deal with. I mean that Aesthetic as a science based on, and limited at every point by, psychology, is nevertheless distinct therefrom, and can only interpret its data in its own way. There is no reason why the psychological unity of attitude should not appear for Aesthetic still as a unity; and I should contend that so far as our experience goes we are fully justified in applying the term art, to such different things as *e.g.*, music, painting, poetry, etc. In this sense, art is, or may be, a real thing, whose reality we must represent to ourselves as something over and above the merely psychological process through which it is experienced; or, more strictly, there is something whose presence within the psychological process is to be explained and accounted for by other than purely psychological laws; and demands the recognition of aesthetic principles. It is largely for psychological purposes, however, that I take for granted the unity of art. If there is a unity; the only secure method would be to test every conclusion by reference to every type of art one could think of. Only thus could we hope to eliminate untrue generalization. As it is, the scope of illustration must seem unduly

restricted, more especially when dealing with the first view of art I want to discuss. The nature of the relation between art and religion may be something indefinitely broader or more comprehensive or more subtle than is implied by the types of art I have in mind, *e.g.*, very early Renaissance painting in Italy, or German music of the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries. Nevertheless in the short space at my disposal I have to try to outline that relation with as much definiteness as possible.

I propose, then, to contrast two *prima facie* opposed theories of art. I shall first explain them, as opposed, at the risk, perhaps, of a little overstatement of both. Then I shall try to bring them together, and show that there is something in each which is applicable to all art worthy of the name. The real question is to decide where the balance lies. It is no doubt one of emphasis.

It is first of all quite certain that religion whether understood in a very narrow sense, or in a sense much wider than the generally accepted one, has at different times in the world's history exercised an enormous compulsion over art, compulsion, I mean as a motive power. That is to say, we have here to deal with those artists, who, as religious considered their religion, the claims which it imposed and the ideas or the ethic which it interpreted, as the most real fact of life, its claims the most pressing, and its doctrine the supreme interests. Art—if indeed they had that word in their vocabulary in any sense remotely akin to that in which we now employ it—art in itself did not enter into competition with those higher religious instincts. They forgot the claim of their art, if indeed the question of claim ever did come up. The very idea of rival claims set up by beauty was unreal. It was religion that had discovered art and brought it to birth. It was the concentration of attention and desire upon the supreme objects of religion that enlisted to their service everything that could be of use.

The value of a subsidiary thing, like art, was constituted by its power to adorn or interpret these; not as something worth following out for its own sake. As one of the ablest living exponents of the view let us take Alessandro Della Seta, whose book, *Religion and Art*,¹ states with extraordinary definiteness the case for religion as the unique inspiration and driving power of art. The development, for example, of the technique of perspective in painting or sculpture relief, takes place with a facility and completeness when a religion and an art grow up together that is not manifested under other circumstances. The motivation of art by religion goes for precision, delicacy and adaptability of technique as well as for spiritual power. But, of course, emphasis is placed upon the latter. Della Seta summarises his general conclusion in the words: "Man would never have set himself the task of representing men because of the beauty and nobility of their form. The form of men appeared beautiful and noble because it had served to clothe the Gods. Man therefore possessed art because he had religion."

Readers of Ruskin will at once perceive the close affinity of Della Seta's Aesthetic with his. Now, though, I should wish to emphasize what may appear to many paradoxical, viz. the thoroughgoing consistency of Ruskin's Aesthetic, I think the difficulties in this first theory with which we have to deal will become inevitably apparent if we approach them through Ruskin. The crux of his difficulty appears in his handling of the painters of the late Italian Renaissance, say, Titian and Michaelangelo. His position indeed with regard to the latter is rather curiously ambiguous. But at all events, he feels elements in Angelo's genius which he cannot justify on the principles which he would like to use. He is aware of his power and his pride, does not like them from the religious point of view, yet is baffled by them as somehow presenting very great aesthetic claims. So he

¹Alessandro Della Seta, *Religion and Art*, English translation, 1914.

summarises Angelo in the rather remarkable phrase, no doubt, profoundly true—"He was proud, but not proud enough to be at peace." Titian exhibits a more complete bankruptcy of, at all events, the application of Ruskin's principles, if not of those principles themselves. It is true that for Ruskin as much as for any man some of Titian's greatest pictures are motived by religion, but there are others whose aesthetic value is in no way explicable, through the religious or ethical motive, or to be substantiated that way. And of this Ruskin eventually became aware. Perhaps it is possible, through Della Seta, to bring the difficulty to a clearer focus. The Italian Archeologist presents us with material that is of absorbing archeological interest and of enormous religious importance. But this material—is it all artistic of the quality it is claimed to be; can its value be made good as purely aesthetic? This, frankly, is what I doubt, and I should like to point out one very significant thing: that both Ruskin and Della Seta make some of their points by completely ignoring the fact of music in Reformation and post-Reformation times.

And now for the statement of the opposite view—that art as creating something that is of value in and for itself is an object that may and ought to be pursued just for the value of the beauty that it produces. The artist is here liberated from any other claim. If religious symbols offer him something which he can incarnate in paint—or other medium—and thereby help him to get the purely aesthetic quality of which he is in search, well and good. Let him use it. But the governing aim is obviously not the religious one but the aesthetic. Further, the aesthetic value is one which sets up a thoroughgoing rivalry with other values. Perhaps there is nothing in life of such worth as art. If so, there is an obligation—for the artist, of course—to pursue it at all costs. The ethical and the religious, in the old sense, becomes subsidiary. But—and this is all important

—religion is not thereby ruled out of life. The true religious instinct is that which is able to place meaner aims in subjection, and which, recognizing the supreme claim of art, makes sure of that, spends the life energy upon that, or rather sacrifices every other mode of activity for that.² Of course, the ethical claim, too, may be fully recognized, and placed side by side with the aesthetic, as equally the object of the religious instinct. But I think we must be prepared to consider the view in which the aesthetic has the supreme claim, and in which the ethical, though not ruled out, is made subordinate to the aesthetic.

I propose now to consider the analogy between the dream—I mean, the literal dream of sleep—and any work of art, or rather, of the psychological process of its creation or of its appreciative enjoyment by the men and women to whom it is presented. I believe myself that this analogy is very far reaching, and that its elaboration and application with all due criticism and care will be one of the most powerful methods of aesthetic in the near future. In applying it to our present problem we have also to consider the analogy in relation to the social art—consciousness as a whole, besides individual works of art. The general principle of the dream in relation to our ordinary consciousness, can, I think be clearly enough stated so far as concerns our present purpose. In the dream we have presented to us a succession of pictures or episodes which are to our waking consciousness *prima facie* unintelligible. They seem confused, bizarre and silly. In reality, and on discovery of the fact that the whole of the imagery of the dream is symbolical in character, they are not unintelligible; but are on the contrary pregnant with meaning. They are exact, subtle, and what is most relevant to our purpose now, of great importance to us.

²Cf. Clive Bell: *Art.*

But the interpretation of the dream, the process by which we become conscious of ourselves, of the dreaming part of ourselves, is as difficult, as it is felt to be wonderful when we begin to take the first steps in it. As well as understanding the dream, we find it take on a new aspect. That is to say, the process of becoming conscious involves, among many other changes, a change in the aesthetic quality of the dream itself. It is difficult I am sure, to convince anyone of this who has not begun to realize the true nature of his dreams; one must really experience for oneself the extraordinary deepening of the whole emotional tone that may follow upon grasping the significance of even a single symbol in a dream. Everything is changed, everything becomes illumined, everything in the dream responds to the new point of view; it is like the resonance of the whole mind to the new and correctly pitched note.

The first point, then, to which I wish to draw attention in the work of art as explicable through this analogy with the dream, is that we find the same process of becoming conscious correlated with an interpretation, or a re-interpretation of the symbols employed by the artist. Now this process of becoming conscious may occur within the artist himself, or during the appreciative enjoyment of the picture or the music on the part of someone quite remote from the artist, or it may be the character which marks the phase of transition from one kind of social art consciousness to another. It will be simplest, however, to illustrate this transitional phase of consciousness or of becoming conscious through the individual artist. I shall take as an example Goethe's extremely familiar little lyric, *Wandrers Nachtlied*. The impression the poem has made on myself at different times tallies exactly with the episode related of Goethe, but of course others may feel differently. At the same time, there is absolutely no doubt in my own mind that this is actually what happens in our reading of poetry

and in our enjoyment of all kinds of beauty. The episode is as follows: In the Autumn, 1780, Goethe spent the night at a shooting box on the summit of the highest hill in the neighborhood of Ilmenau. There he wrote the familiar lines

“Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh,”

“Over all the hills is rest; over all the trees thou markest scarce a breath. The little birds are silent in the wood. Do thou but wait; for soon shalt thou too be at rest.” They were written in pencil on the wall on one of the upper rooms. There was no conscious expression, then, of a desire for the final rest. It was only a simple lullaby. About fifty years later, in 1831, the year before his death, he re-visited the house, went upstairs, searched for the poem on the wall and amid much emotion, repeated the last two lines, “Do thou but wait; soon shalt thou too be at rest.”

I repeat that it seems to me quite natural for any of us to read the poem in these two ways. There is the acceptance of its apparent meaning, an impression of simple beauty, and there is the impression that comes through the re-interpretation of its symbolism, beauty of a much greater and profounder kind. The first point, then, that I wish to make is that we must admit the place and claim of the art that remains in its own unconsciousness. Symbols spring up from the unconscious of the artist—or perhaps, quite as well—from the deep social unconscious of his time, and shape themselves in aesthetically pleasing form in the picture. But here emerges a point of difference between the dream and the work of art. Dreams are not necessarily, though some dreams may be, aesthetically pleasing; art must be so, or else it is not the matter with which we are dealing. Now, in virtue of this fact, I suggest, though I am by no means sure, that there is always present in the creation or enjoyment of art at least some trace of the transitional phase, that I have described as the becoming

conscious. The unconsciousness of art and of the dream are never quite of the same kind; their correlation seems to involve an element in the former that is not, or need not be, in the dream.

That does not alter the fact that there is some art which shows, relatively, a profound unconsciousness. I have now to indicate the connection of such unconsciousness with the type of art which forms the ideal of the first of the theories we have been discussing.

When a great artistic movement seems to owe its power to the driving force of religion in a manner generally indicated by this theory of art, it is clear that the main religious ideas, say of God, of Immortality, or the death and resurrection of Christ must be held in complete conviction. The whole of the symbolism which accompanies them and through which they are stabilized and made accessible to faith comes to the mind as real. The intercession, for example, of the Mother of God is not symbolical in the sense that it stands for some other reality imperfectly apprehended. This intercession is itself believed in literally as a fact. Our difficulty here, of course, is that even in the great primitive periods of art we shall be encumbered with an enormous amount of conventional work, or even of work totally indifferent to religious conviction. But that hardly alters the main line of our argument. We do recognize, and I suppose, art critics of all sorts and conditions of views will be agreed in recognizing, the primitive type of work that bears the peculiar artistic quality I am trying to indicate. The picture—or whatever it may be—is laid before the people as actually representing what happens or exists. The artist believes it and they believe it. But now observe the limitation of this type of work—rather, I would say, observe the extraordinary transformation it undergoes when subjected to the scrutiny of people whose art consciousness has undergone a total change. It does not cease

to be beautiful. Perhaps it becomes more beautiful. I fancy that is true of many pictures. At all events, it is changed aesthetically. The intercession of the virgin is no longer the most important symbol of religious life, or the fact of intercession is denied. If we feel totally indifferent to the virgin, the picture may be nothing more than a somewhat strange, somewhat beautiful, somewhat perplexing piece of imagery. If it was at any time, or for any appreciative critic, a good picture, it will not likely ever be totally indifferent to anyone who likes pictures. But to us of the present generation who begin to wonder very much what the intercession of the virgin really meant, it will have all the added wonder of a half-interpreted dream. But that is not my point. Interest and wonder are good things. But they are not enough here. What I feel certain of is the deepening of the purely aesthetic appreciation of pictures of a bygone age with our deepening consciousness of the psychic forces at work in epochs of history and levels of social evolution which our general cultural resources are only now enabling us to understand.

But now let us go back to the artist and the people who looked at his pictures during his own life time with what special resources they had at their command and under the special limitations their age imposed upon them.

The artist as believing the liberal intercession of the virgin was unconscious of the nature of his own soul and of the forces at work in the social consciousness generally—unconscious, that is to say in a sense in which the art lover of a later time is not unconscious of these things. Now here I must try to distinguish two points of view—to distinguish them first, but really in the hope of showing that they may not be so different as I state them. It might be a real intellectual gain for the artist to become conscious of the hidden forces thus operating within his art instinct while yet it might be, aesthetically, either hurtful or in-

different. The point of view therefore of which we have to make sure is defined in the question whether or not it be of *aesthetic* value for the artist to interpret his own work in the sense of coming to a deeper consciousness of the symbols he employs. I contend, first, that it is in any case of aesthetic relevance and import whether he do or do not so become conscious; and in the second place, that art never really comes to its own until in some measure at all events it shows this increased consciousness. Or, in other words, I say that one of the great contributions that art makes to human life is in its interpretation of those marvellous symbols that our unconsciousness whether individual or social is continually bringing up to us. But this contribution may be intellectual, or economic, or what-not. Well and good so far as it goes. I should not therefore be content until I could prove that this contribution has also its purely aesthetic value. That is to say, that art locked up in its unconsciousness does provide us with beautiful things; but that the beauty provided by art which is conscious of itself and can by genuinely artistic means offer the interpretation of its own symbols, is of a higher order; and further, that this phase of transition, of heightening and deepening consciousness, must be one of profound importance for any attempt to say what the nature of art really is and what its value is alongside other values in human life.

These considerations should help us not perhaps to state, but to indicate, the limitations which the ethical or religious view of art imposes on it. So long as the reality of the symbols belonging to primitive religious faith is a matter of absolute conviction, there may be enormous driving power available for art production, but such conviction sets correspondingly strong forces at work which operate against the emergence of that particular character of art in virtue of which it can become its own interpreter. What, then by way of corrective or supplement, has the other

theory of art to give—that art, in its own right, has a place in life, and that it is at least legitimate for the artist to work in the full consciousness of the pure aesthetic value as an end to be realized?

First it is only in the full consciousness of this purely aesthetic purpose of art that we can entirely free ourselves from the confusion produced by the presence in it of qualities, in themselves excellent, but possessing a value which is not purely aesthetic. We do not, of course, know, we can at best dimly feel, what constitutes excellence in art *qua* aesthetic. It may involve things ethical, religious, economic, historical; or it may not. The excellence of different forms of art, music, architecture, poetry, etc., may involve these things in different degrees; or it may not. But it is profoundly important that we should not seek in art, for aesthetically extraneous qualities; or allow a bias in ourselves in favor of certain things we like which are not wholly in subserviance to beauty. To admit that it is sometimes possible, or that it is in some way possible, to be conscious of a strictly aesthetic purpose in art will perhaps be one of the things that may help us to this impartiality of appreciation. But further, such a view is most useful as taking up an attitude of uncompromising criticism towards those societies, or epochs of social development, in which religion has indeed been powerfully operative, but has been unproductive towards art. In the claim made by this theory for the fundamentally religious character of attention or devotion to art itself as the aesthetic end, it is formulating a doctrine that human life cannot afford to do without. Granted that the aesthetic is either the greatest value, or one of the great individual self-substantiating values exerting claim upon human experience, the ministry of art becomes a correspondingly urgent religious function.

This is, no doubt, a very curious inversion of the accepted relation. And it is just in this relation that some-

thing will have to be said in criticism of the whole view and of the attitude which it implies in the artist. Religion it may seem is somehow wrong placed with respect to art. It ought to be the channel of nourishment for art, to provide its contact with the earth—with the deep-lying, universal instincts of our nature, with what has been called the collective unconscious. Let us examine, then, the nature of this possible defect in the light of what help we can get from the psychology of the unconscious.

When an artist works under what I have called the compelling power of religion, he does not set out as it were wondering to himself what symbols he shall use. Rather they are presented to him. And when he is confronted with, say, symbols of sacrifice or submission, cast up before him as it were by the turbid waves of his unconsciousness, he has got to accept them. If he refuses them, or eludes them, his whole inspiration lapses. His strength as artist depends upon his allowing himself to be carried along by the flow of his own individual psychology, a power which he does not know and which, in its main current, he does not attempt to control. By this means the artistic handling of his problem has the stability given by the convergence of all the lines of symbolism which belong to his unconsciousness from his birth, or even from his pre-natal existence. They all concentrate upon that problem and he has behind him the power of their united and convergent action. It might be possible to illustrate this in a hundred ways from Dante alone. On the other hand, the artist who has freed himself from this compulsion exerted by religion, and who is out consciously upon the search for discovery of beautiful from alone, may choose from among the various symbols presented. But in virtue of the exercise of this choice, he is liable at any moment to step out of the main primitive currents of his psychology. If he does so, the stability of his attitude to the problem is gone. What happens is that

he merely dips down into the unconscious, and brings up this and that isolated symbol. His very consciousness of his aim is something that defeats itself. For a symbol by itself is little or nothing. It is its psychological setting alone that gives its significance and its power. That is why so much modern art seems to be of the nature of the play of little bizarre phantasies and curious forms—that please, no doubt, yet which are felt to be strange and bewildering as much as pleasant. And yet the movement is full of significance. The artist liberates himself to anything that comes from the unconscious, to anything that seems beautiful. For the world of the unconscious is of enormous interest, and the conviction of the artist is always that it is the very stuff out of which beauty is to emerge, the raw material of beauty. Let us give it free play in art; set it to work to amuse us, and let us entertain ourselves watching its bizarre freaks. They are instinctive, natural. They have the right to expression. Nothing else will furnish the true forms of art. Anything else is too intellectual, too sophisticated. And so the extreme of consciousness goes out upon the search for the extreme of unconsciousness. Nor may we justly object. Besides, the very oddness and intractability of those bizarre phantasies involve the discovery and invention of new art forms and new methods.

There are many of our dreams that arouse our interest, but are so extremely odd that is difficult to communicate them by any ordinary means. When you are talking to a lady who is looking straight at you, you cannot, under the conditions of time and space, see the back of her. But you can do this well enough in a dream. Such a dream is difficult to render aesthetically in painting, still more so, perhaps in music. Nevertheless, to confine ourselves for the moment, to the simpler problems of the two, an attempt could be made by the former art to render the characteristic

peculiarity of the dream. Such, I take it, is the explanation for example, of cubism in modern painting, say Picasso's picture of the *Lady in the Armchair*. This is probably nothing else than an artistic device through which our unconsciousness can disport itself with a little more freedom, and admire, at one and the same time, aspects of the lady that under the limitations of our waking consciousness cannot so be enjoyed. The picture takes on the fascination and mystery of the dream, with not a little of its fear. The lady is veritably alive with motion—motion, inscrutable, formidable, concentrated—as in the lightning flicker of her fan. Most dangerous—as if yielding unwarily to a seductive vertigo, you should tumble forward, be whirled round, and your universe blacken and founder in an *eldrich scraich*.

We cannot on the whole, treat altogether lightly this effort at a direct approach to beauty, or the conscious attempt on the part of the artist to avail himself immediately of the resources of the unconscious. It is only a guiding principle that is absent, though that indeed may be difficult to discover. The problem of art would therefore be to obtain a full consciousness of its aim and value as purely aesthetic while yet the artist should not lose the driving power that seems to come only from a conviction of the reality of other values, not aesthetic, or at least not necessarily aesthetic. So stated, this seems little other than a paradox. Yet as a matter of historical fact, we should no doubt find all degrees of relative emphasis. I am myself inclined to the view that the great times of art in the world's history belong to the periods of not quite complete liberation from primitive convictions. The crest of the wave of such a movement is perhaps what brings about the final liberation. That is why the period of perfect liberation seems often enough to be coincident with the emptiness and desolation of the spirit. But in this regard history seems to teach a clear enough lesson. The greatest art

movements are wave-like in character. The crest is magnificent, and catastrophic. In the period immediately succeeding the decline, it has always been the habit of people to bewail the fall and to look about helplessly for some continuation of the art-life along the old lines. This seems totally wrong. What history gives is the revivification of the undying instinct to beauty—but in some totally new and different form—a form beyond the scope of any prophecy.

This character of climax seems, therefore, to belong to art. Where you find magnificent art, make up your mind for the catastrophe. In fact, this seems as inevitable, and as natural, as for a man to awake out of sleep. That there is a fundamental aesthetic value in the coming to consciousness by art of the meaning of its own symbols is not incompatible with the probability that this act or transitional phase is something that eventually strains it, as art, to breaking point; and therefore banishes, for the time being all possibility of the value in question. Yet this straining does not seem capable of resistance or check. Perhaps it is like birth, and its contribution to life greater than one might suspect.

At least, this is how I interpret the work of an artist like Beethoven. It is not that he gives us Wagner. Wagner is excellent, but he does not explain or validate Beethoven. What Beethoven gave to Europe was liberation. Europe needed liberation more than anything else, and perhaps this liberation that he gave was for the time being incompatible with the soaring music of the Bach-Mozart-Beethoven type.

One word more. We have need, we have discovered, of our dreams, and of all that the unconscious can give. But in the cold day-light of awakening we are not really cut off from that unconsciousness. We have access to it, and we can utilize it. If it is part of the excellence of art itself that

at a certain stage it comes to a sudden end, there is a relation to establish between the reflective mood thus deprived of power artistically to express itself and the foregoing period of more emotional or artistic life. The problem of the relation of art to reflection and to other non-aesthetic spheres of culture and of life has hardly yet been entered upon. Yet it is one of almost infinite scope and possibility.

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